



## CONNECTICUT DEMOCRATIC PARTY

February 29, 2016

Good afternoon, Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila, Senator McLachlan, Representative Smith and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. My name is Nick Balletto, and I am the Chairman of the Connecticut Democratic State Central Committee, having previously served as the Democratic Town Chair of New Haven. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in support of SB 257, Secretary of State Denise Merrill's proposal to repeal Connecticut's "Party Loyalty" Laws.

As Chairman of the Connecticut Democratic Party, it is my job to promote and strengthen the Democratic brand and aid in the election of Democratic officials on the local, state, and federal levels. This includes engaging and maintaining the membership of our party before, during, and after elections - it means building the bench of our local town committees and encouraging new members to join and take part in our process.

The reality is that the Democratic Party is a big tent and we continue to grow. We pride ourselves on our ability to represent many constituencies and individuals - black, white, gay, straight, male, or female - because we truly believe that is what is great about America: we have always been a melting pot that brings together people from all different backgrounds, races, and ethnicities for a greater cause. And our cause is to elect leaders who embody our goals of lifting our communities up and carrying on our Democratic values.

To assume our party is monolithic in its policy and political views is also a mistake. We are a family. We have our arguments and agreements. Feelings are hurt. Votes are lost - but at the end of the day I truly believe that what strengthens our party is our openness and our inclusion. I believe that those discussions have strengthened us as a party by challenging our preconceptions and forcing us to defend our positions. Voting rights, human rights, and workers' rights, all came as a break with the past. Debate is a cornerstone of our political life as a society, and nowhere is that clearer than in the debates we hold with those with whom we disagree.

Here in Connecticut I watched with dismay as the Republican Party in the Town of Brookfield callously expelled one of their own for the crime of crossing party lines to occasionally support Democratic candidates. I reached out to those individuals to offer them a spot in the Democratic Party - because, after all, we welcome individuals who are willing to participate in our political process. Particularly in a state - like so many others - in which voter turnout during our local, state, and federal primaries is often less than 20 percent, I cannot fathom why we would discourage people from participating in the process of electing our leaders.

This is behavior that I would have expected at a different time and in a different place, but it should not be legal here in Connecticut in 2016. While I understand using party loyalty as a litmus test for serving on town committees or party leadership positions, voters - not party leaders - should be able to choose the party to which they want to belong and in which primary they want to vote. That should be their right as citizens. This is not a competition amongst baseball teams preparing for a series - this is about citizens participating in our democracy.

I recognize that no one political party has a monopoly on good ideas, and people may not always vote the party line. Indeed I have personally - albeit rarely - voted for candidates not endorsed by the Democratic Party. But I don't believe any of you think that should impact my standing as a member of the Democratic Party or should discredit my service and commitment to the values we hold as a party.

The bottom line is that this law flies in the face of one of the cornerstones of our democracy: free and open discussion. I thank Secretary Merrill for proposing this legislation and hope you support SB 257 and do away with this outdated, unnecessary law.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Nick Balleto". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Nick Balleto, Chairman  
Connecticut Democratic Party